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Democracy Dies in Darkness

SOVIET GEORGIA IS ACCUSED OF RIGHTS ABUSES

TAJIKISTAN JOINS 11 OTHERS IN DECLARING INDEPENDENCE

By Fred Hiatt

September 10, 1991 at 1:00 a.m. EDT

MOSCOW, SEPT. 9 -- As Tajikistan joined the rush of Soviet republics toward independence, a U.S. congressional delegation to a human rights conference here said today it had found "numerous incidences of human rights violations" and a disturbing lack of democracy in Georgia, one of the republics now seeking sovereignty.

Sen. Dennis DeConcini (D-Ariz.) said the elected president of Georgia, Zviad Gamsakhurdia, has claimed "almost absolute power" and dissidents in the southern republic "are not safe to express opposition." The Russian republic also accused Georgia of human rights abuses, Reuter reported.

Tajikistan's declaration leaves Kazakhstan, Turkmenia and the giant republic of Russia as the only three of 15 republics that have not set themselves on some sort of path to independence.

To bolster its own bid for independence, the Ukraine, which declared its sovereignty two weeks ago, has asked President Bush for U.S. diplomatic recognition, a senior administration official said today, staff writer John Yang reported from Washington.

In a letter to Bush, Ukrainian President Leonid Kravchuk asserted the sovereignty of the Ukrainian constitution and laws over his republic and sought diplomatic relations and an exchange of missions with the United States once voters there approve a referendum on independence, the official said.

The administration is not expected to respond to the request until after the Dec. 1 referendum vote, according to the official.

The criticism by the visiting members of Congress here highlighted the changing nature of human rights concerns here as the highly centralized rule by the Communist Party ends after 74 years. With democrats ascendant following the failure of a right-wing coup three weeks ago, Western concerns about political prisoners, freedom to emigrate and freedom of speech largely have been answered.

But the headlong changes have raised new concerns, such as the absence of democracy and the potential danger to ethnic minorities within some of the newly nationalistic component republics of the old Soviet Union, Rep. Dan Glickman (D-Kan.) said.

"These are issues that haven't been dealt with openly," Glickman said in a news conference today. "There's going to have to be an awful lot of good old-fashioned oversight and pressure."

The delegation, led by DeConcini and Rep. Steny Hoyer (D-Md.), is in Moscow for the opening Tuesday of the international Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), whose Helsinki Accord on human rights inspired the dissident movement here during the repressive rule in the 1960s and '70s of Leonid Brezhnev and after. Secretary of State James A. Baker III also will attend and speak at the conference.

Despite a few concerns about remaining political prisoners and "refuseniks" -- dominant issues during the Cold War -- the conference is likely to take place in an atmosphere of goodwill and congratulation for the forces of democracy and human rights, delegates here said. Vladimir Petrovsky, deputy foreign minister, told the U.S. group that the Baltic republics of Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia will be admitted to the CSCE Tuesday as independent nations, fulfilling a goal that Moscow long opposed. Estonia also has applied for membership in the International Monetary Fund, the organization said in Washington today.

The deputy minister also told the U.S. delegation that the Soviet Union's traditional rejection of human rights complaints as unwarranted outside interference in its internal affairs is "no longer applicable," Hoyer said.

But some here fear that the divisive and nationalistic pressures now loosed within the Soviet Union will leave little time to rejoice in the new freedoms. As if to underscore those fears, the official news agency Tass reported today that 13 people were killed and more than 30 wounded in ethnic violence during the weekend in the mountainous district of Nagorno-Karabakh, a Christian Armenian enclave within the Muslim republic of Azerbaijan. The Azerbaijani government announced today that it was forming its own defense ministry and armed forces.

As in Georgia, opposition forces in Azerbaijan, which borders Iran, claim that the advent of independence and the breakup of Communist power have not brought democracy. Republic President Ayaz Mutalibov, a former Communist, today claimed victory in a presidential election in which he was the only candidate.

Opposition forces boycotted the election, saying they did not have time to mount a credible campaign, and encouraged voters not to cast ballots. They disputed the official claim that 3.24 million, or 83.7 percent of voters, had turned out.

Georgia also has been the site of violence between Georgians and ethnic minorities, including Ossetians, and of a tense standoff between Gamsakhurdia and the opposition.

In its statement on the Georgian situation, which was carried by Tass, Russia expressed concern about the rights of ethnic minorities and said, "If the situation worsens, the question of declaring a state of emergency in all regions of conflict might have to be considered."

None of the delegation, Hoyer said, "left feeling confident that democracy was in the ascendancy." Although Gamsakhurdia was reelected in a landslide, the opposition now accuses him of undemocratic tactics, including jailing political prisoners and approving laws that allow the prosecution of "anyone who dishonors the president," DeConcini said.

Hoyer said Gamsakhurdia denied the existence of political prisoners during their talks, but agreed to allow Amnesty International and the CSCE to investigate.

Area: 54,019 square miles, roughly the size of New York and New Jersey combined.

Population: 5.2 million (1990 estimate)

People: Over half the residents are Tajiks, mostly Muslims, speaking an Iranian dialect.

Chief occupations: Farming, cattle breeding.

Chief crops: Cotton, grain, rice, fruits.

Industry: Primarily based on mineral deposits, coal and hydroelectic power.